

Gold for Your Relationships

What's the fastest way to improve all of your relationships? Learn to listen. Really listen.

The value of listening is often overlooked. Why? Because it sounds so easy. How hard can it be? If I'm not talking, then I'm listening, right?

This is far from true. Listening is easy to describe but difficult to do. Listening takes deep concentration. It requires a commitment to staying with the other person no matter where her story takes you. It requires staying open to her, no matter how her story makes you feel.

Imagine your close friend is telling you about a project that went awry at work. What does she need from you? She needs your complete attention. She needs you to understand and to let her know that you understand. That seems like a pretty short list of responsibilities. All right, now let's imagine that you're sitting across from her at the kitchen table, listening. Soon a thought flits across your mind about something *you* forgot to do at work. "I need to take care of that as soon as I get in." Oops, you've missed a couple of sentences. Back to listening. Next, you start to feel restless because all sorts of ideas pour into your mind. Your friend's story reminds you of something that happened to you not long ago. The outcome was hilarious and you know she'd appreciate the joke. But not now, because she's got her own problem to solve.

You just missed a crucial transition and now you're a little lost. Better concentrate a little harder. This takes effort! Your mind has a life of its own and it wants to go with the flow. It takes discipline to go with someone else's flow and do absolutely nothing else.

Now your friend talks about how her boss always leaves things to the last minute. You suddenly feel sensitive. That's a tendency of your own. You find yourself sympathizing with her boss. You wonder if your friend gets irritated with you in the same way she does with her boss. You start defending yourself in your mind—and miss more of what your friend is saying.

Now your friend comes to the really painful part. How her boss blamed her for the problems in front of the whole team. It's hard to stay open to this, because you don't want her to be in pain. Your overly obliging mind starts generating quick and easy solutions, to get her out of her misery fast. You're tempted to tell her it's not so bad, that you know things will work out, that in the grand scheme of things it's not that important.

But you know what her reaction will be if you say any of those things. Frustration. Irritation. "You just don't understand!"

And understanding is what she needs most of all.

Strange, isn't it? You feel like you do understand. That's why you want to take away her distress. But all the brilliant solutions in the world will not make her feel like you understand. The only thing that will do that is listening. Not jumping in with your

own stories, not worrying about your own problems, and not offering solutions. Listening and absolutely nothing else.

Listening. Easy to describe. Hard to do. Pure gold for your relationships.

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